

AT THE EDGE OF THE NIGHT

HEREIN the Free Agent Comes to the Rescue of a Woman Who Was Alone—and Afraid

By Edward Hungerford

DAVID GORDON, beginning life as a grocer's clerk in Northfield, N. Y., becomes a "free agent" in the business and, crowding his principal competitors out of business, becomes a man of importance in the community. So engrossed is he in money making that he neglects Rhoda Clark, to whom he was engaged. Disheartened by his apparent indifference, her eyesight failing, Rhoda goes to New York city to earn her living, carefully concealing her whereabouts from David. Conscience-stricken, he fails in his efforts to locate her, but when he makes a last heart-hungry appeal to her, she telegraphs back her address, with the single word "Come!"

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

MRS. LARKINS' boarding house stood within a shabby, quiet street in South Brooklyn. It had once been a fashionable street, and it was still a genteel street. Old Mr. Janvers, who still clung to it, remembered the time when the Governor of the State dwelt directly across from what was Mrs. Larkins' boarding house in these decadent days.

Mr. Janvers was Mrs. Larkins' oldest lodger, and Mrs. Larkins' house was once a great house—one of the show places of the quiet street—but which had fallen betimes with it. A green and clinging vine made desperate attempts to clothe the rusty front and sent a single slender tendril into the third floor front hall, where Mr. Janvers sat so much of the time and thought of the days when he had seen the Governor come from his house across the way.

Sometimes the old man sat there alone and dozed in the warm sunshine. At other times Paul Craver came and talked with him. Paul Craver had much time for conversation. He was an illustrator and he could have doubled his output without being pressed for time. Moreover, he was close at hand, being the occupant of the tiny room at the rear of the hall. The two were the only occupants of that floor—at least until the girl who called herself Rhoda Clark came and took the big room with the open fire that faced the rear yard. Mr. Janvers rarely delved into his personal history and Paul Craver was too blindly optimistic about the future to care a rap about has-beens. Rhoda told little of herself, but that was a common ruse of young women at Mrs. Larkins' who wished to attract the attention of the young men in the boarding house.

Rhoda fumbled for a moment with her latch key. It was dark in the entry for her, and she—tired and disconsolate. The hall was also dark to her and she wondered what it would be like if one had always to grope blindly in the dark. Then she grew discouraged once again, just as a door shot open and laid a path of yellow light out into the gloomy hall—a path blocked by the figure of Paul Craver.

"Late to-night again. We'll fine you for sticking at the office this way," he laughed.

She caught the infection of his courage.

"I was not out of it until six. I took an extra hour this noon to go up town."

The laughter went out of his voice.

"You're not well," he scolded, "and overtaxing yourself all the while. It would be better if you would let that noon shopping go."

The truth tried to press itself to her lips, but she was a cool one—Rhoda Clark—and she realized that it was best that Paul Craver should not know—not just yet. She thanked him for his scoldings and passed into her own room. She lighted the gas that flared beside her mirror and caught a single glimpse of her white, tired face. It scared her. She tore the pins out of her hat, sent it spinning into a chair and threw herself across the chair, crying as if her very heart would break. She was but a girl, after all.

She was but a girl and she could not forget. Try as she might she could not forget what that big, cross, black-bearded man up in Congress street had told her that day. Six months—an eternity to come. Six months, and then—then—the endless night.

Paul Craver wondered if he heard that good fellow of the petticoats in the next room, and he might have almost broken in upon her—in his impulsive way. He tried to fashion a cartoon—an awfully good thing—"All the World's a Stage"—globe floating in the clouds, scantily dressed lady pirouetting aloft upon a row of footlight shields and musicians' heads in the foreground—and he was chuckling as he dabbled with his brushes—chuckling till he heard Rhoda crying in her lonely room, recalled her white face—and then he swore and threw his brushes in the corner.

If he dared. If he only understood.

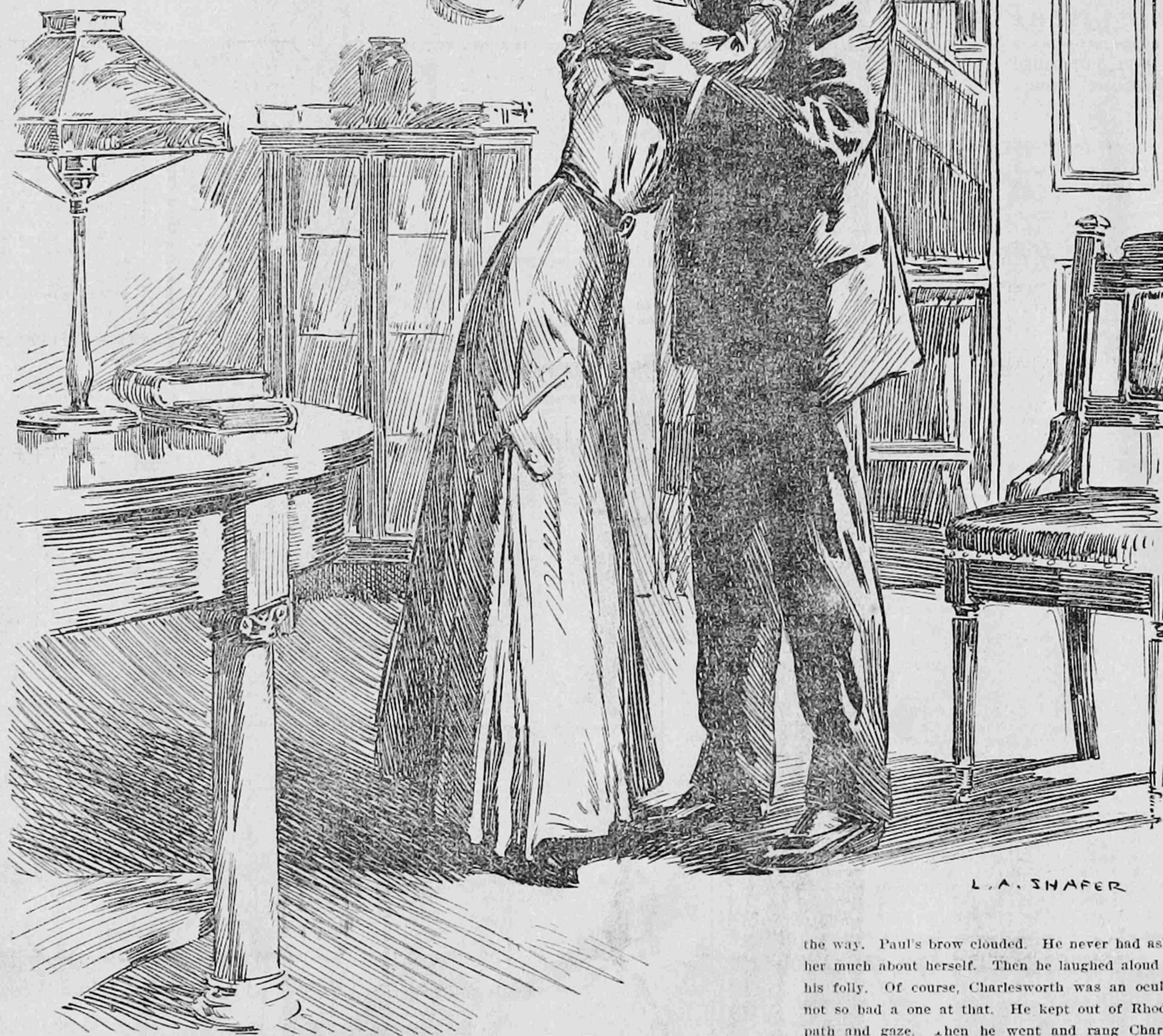
The Black Glasses.

Still, women are odd, and Paul Craver, who thought he understood the sex, hesitated at Rhoda. He sat in his chair and closed his eyes. If he could only make her laugh once again, as she used to laugh when first she came to the boarding house. He recalled how Mr. Janvers and he had first resented the invasion of their floor by petticoats. He caught sight of her for the first time a twelvemonth—no, no, it was nearly two years ago now. She had been toiling up the stair, a slender woman, of height and figure that brought revel to his artistic eye. She was simply dressed and almost pretty. But between her low drawn hair and her sweet, firm mouth, her eyes, the great real index, were hidden by great, black spectacles that fitted close to her face.

"A shame," he had then thought, but had content-

ed himself with the reflection that the black spectacles were probably temporary and that within a little time he would see the lovely eyes—they must have been lovely.

But when she had been at Mrs. Larkins' a long time Paul Craver saw that the girl had no intention of re-



"I Would do anything in the world for you, David."

moving the glasses. Indoors and out, in sunlight and in shadow, the great black spectacles sat upon her nose. When he looked at her from afar, when he came close to her, the thick lenses would not be penetrated by his gaze.

Sometimes he sought to catch her with them off, so as to have a single glimpse of the mysterious eyes that must shine behind them, but every time she baffled him. Once he passed her on the stair in the dark and struck a match quickly, muttering something about the darkness of the hole, but even then the goggles sat upon her nose. Another time he inveigled her into looking at some sketches he had sold—they were great good friends already—and she strained her eyes to look at the drawings. He flared the gas.

"Perhaps if you were to slip off your glasses," he began.

"I cannot," she had said, and Paul Craver's curiosity was not brave enough to press the matter. But he was greatly perplexed.

In the morning when she went out to her work her glance fell toward the hall mantle—and then she checked herself with a smile. She did not get letters at Mrs. Larkins', but then she knew that if she went to the grimy post office the letter that she wanted would not be there. There might be a letter telling how a man was making money—and between the lines telling how he was forgetting his promises—but there would be no letter from David Gordon telling what sacrifice he was willing to make for her. That sort of letter seemed almost too much to expect.

She plucked up her courage and tried to keep her mind from going back to yesterday, to the horrid thing that the big cross with the black beard had whispered into her ear. Down the street a hurdy-gurdy was jingling out a merry ode to a sunny dawn and the children were swinging about it in a dancing circle.

But what did it matter that the street was gray and gloomy to her poor eyes and bright and sunshiny to all others? What did it matter that children of all years stared curiously at her big black spectacles? What mattered anything, save that David Gordon had not yet written the message that her heart demanded?

Paul Craver heard the jangle of the upstairs bell and the shrill call of the postman's whistle, and, being young and of optimistic temperament, instantly surmised that some publisher had sent him a check. He hurried down stairs and found lots of letters, but not a blessed son for Paul Craver. Well, breakfasts do not go with the artistic temperament

anyway, and Paul went up stairs to talk with Mr. Janvers.

"She was crying last night," he confided to the old man.

"Women do—lots o' nights."

"She doesn't often," corrected Paul. Mr. Janvers watched the children around the hurdy-gurdy down in the street. Paul began again:—

"Would a man marry a woman because he sympathized with her?"

"Not many do."

"But if a man made up his mind to do it?"

"Old men and prophets say that kind of marriage does not bear the brand of heaven."

"I—suppose not," Paul Craver paused, then began:—"But would that prevent a man from marrying whom he pleases?"

"And not an itching of the heart toward the lassie?"

"A man might marry a girl because she was alone and afraid, and come to love her afterward?"

"They generally don't, Paul," said the old man.

Paul Craver rolled a cigarette and lighted it before he resumed.

"A man might marry if he had the right sort of income," he said, with an affectation of nonchalance.

"I might marry, myself, if I sold any of my sketches. By Jove, I think I will marry if I sell 'All the World's a Stage.' That's a bully idea, my dear sir—globe floating in the clouds, scantily dressed lady atop of it, row of footlight shades and musicians' heads as business of foreground, colors, colors!"

But old Mr. Janvers was bored by Paul Craver in details and he was shaking him by the shoulders.

"What put all this marrying in your head?" he demanded.

Paul did not laugh as he balanced his hands on the old man's waist.

The Night Tears.

"She cried her poor weak eyes and her dear little heart nearly out last night," he said, but Mr. Janvers only answered by telling his anecdote of the Governor of the State when that functionary lived across the street. This anecdote was endless, a thing in chapters. How Mr. Janvers first saw the Governor, how the Governor first saw Mr. Janvers; it proceeded endlessly and Paul Craver gathered up his hat and hurried from the house.

That noon the illustrator found himself in one of the short streets that lead to the east of Madison square. He looked up from a reverie that dragged his gaze along the flags of the sidewalk just in time to see Rhoda Clark come out from the brown stone house of his friend, Charlesworth, who lived across

the way. Paul's brow clouded. He never had asked her much about herself. Then he laughed aloud for his folly. Of course, Charlesworth was an oculist; not so bad a one at that. He kept out of Rhoda's path and gaze. When he went and rang Charlesworth's bell.

The one artist stuck the other for lunch. In the course of that lunch Paul Craver heard the truth from the lips of his big, cross friend with the black beard. His mind was more firmly set than before. His sketch would have to sell now. He must have funds, this boy, for he was going to the rescue—to the rescue of a woman who was alone—and afraid.

When he came home there were no letters for him or for any one else on that mantel rack. All the other folk in the house had mail that day. Mr. Janvers had his pension money in a long franked envelope from Washington. Rhoda had her letter. Her letter was in her hand as she lay across her bed and read and reread:—

"Dear girl, with the eyes of blue and the heart of sunshine"—

"Now, where did he get that?" she kept asking herself, and plunged in deeper:—

"I have been down into hell and never scorched my brows. I have been down into the valleys of darkness, but the sunlight has finally stuck with me. Rhoda, how blind I have been. Rhoda I love you. Please marry me. I am poor, the veriest church mouse is richer. I'm poor, poor, poor, hungry, starved for your love, dear."

And after that she could read no further, for the very joy of her living sat so hard upon her that she could not follow the written page. He was going to redeem his promise. What did it matter now what the big, cross man with the black beard had said to her? If she could see David Gordon at dusk she would be ready to go forth into the eternal night with his voice to steady her in the dark.

Paul Craver met her in the hall as she slipped out to the telegraph office. It was a dim place, at evening, even for his keen eyes, but he thought he saw a difference. Her face—her lovely oval face—was no longer colorless. The warm pink glow of youth and happiness were tinted upon her cheeks. He would have stopped her, but he did not dare.

If he had but dared! If he only understood!

Still, women are odd, and Paul Craver, who thought he understood the sex, had always hesitated at Rhoda.

A posy in her hair for the sake of the Rhoda of the Northfield days. A caller in the faded parlor. A swish and a sweep into that big, desolate place and a voice calling out behind her:—

"Rhoda."

She turned quickly on her heel at the sound of the loved voice.

David Gordon rose to the tips of his toes, then sank back on his heels, pale and affrighted.

"Rhoda, what have they done to you?" his soul whispered out to her.

Where was the Rhoda he had known, the girl with the eyes that had used to laugh into his? Who was this tall, colorless woman, with the familiar mass of soft hair above and the great expressionless goggles beneath?

She did not answer with speech but came close to him and grasped his hands.

"I have waited a long time, David," she said, "a horrid long time."

Still he did not understand.

"Do take them off," he demanded.

She hesitated for a moment, then unhooked the spectacles from her ears and buried her poor eyes on his shoulder.

"I would do anything in the world for you, David," she said.

Then she quickly replaced her goggles, for she was completely helpless without them, and faced him bravely.

"Oh, I know you do understand," she said, putting the tips of her fingers to the spectacles. "When I first put these on they told me that it was for a few weeks only. But the weeks swept into months, twelve months, that was a year, and then I found that I could not do without them. One year, two years, three years. All this time they led me on by promises. They lied to me."

"Lied to you?"

Braving the Truth.

"They did lie to me," she continued. "They lied to me and they knew it. And it was only within the week that there was one of them who was brave enough to know that I was brave enough for the truth. And he whispered into my ear that I was going into the eternal night. And he seemed afraid of what he had done. He seemed afraid. Oh, God, David, I could have kissed him for ending that suspense."

He put his finger on her lips to silence her. She was nervous and overwrought, but he was never cooler in his life.

"I am going—blind," she again whispered to him.

He shook his head and smiled at her.

"You are not," he said.

"You do not understand," she protested.

"I do understand," he said, in his blunt way. "I have been through hell. I wrote you that. They tried to crush me, to break me. Abraham Bassford, went to every bank in Northfield and said that I was on the edge of bankruptcy—he said that—and Serlon Bristow and some of those others began to believe him. They had me on the narrow edge, and"—he looked at her slyly as if seeking her permission to smile frankly upon her—"I never forgot for a moment about that horse and carriage and the hired girl."

She lifted her face as if to protest once again, but he would not hear it.

"It isn't the money as money that I sought," he said. "It was the good that money might do. There's your potency in coin and in stocks and greasy bills. It's the pull of money. If I had the pull once—"

He stopped of his own volition. He could not even think of his mother, and he began anew.

"I've the money—the whole cursed pull of it, now—and Rhoda, you are not going blind. I'll not let you."

He caught her in his arms and for a long time she was silent. Then she lifted her delicate face once again—and this:—

"I know now, David," she whispered. "I am confident. I am not going to give up. I can look a long way ahead and faintly see the sunshine there."

Paul Craver walked the streets of New York for five days with a companion. That companion was the truth, as Charlesworth had told it to him. He knew now what the girl's black spectacles betokened and his mind was still set. He did not love her, he kept telling himself, but still he could not stand by and see her drift helpless into the eternal night. When that came she would lose her position and the little wage it gave her, and after that—what?

Paul Craver had once gone to the almshouse to make illustrations of types there, and there had been an old droning woman who was blind. Paul Craver could not forget her. Love or no love, let the testimony of old Mr. Janvers go unheard. God sent situations so that men might meet them, responsibilities that they could in no honor dodge. Besides, Rhoda was a dear.

Paul Craver refused to look upon himself as a man who was shouldering a great sacrifice. He simply looked upon himself as living up to the responsibilities of a man who was refusing to close his eyes upon a woman drifting out into a black, black night, helpless and alone.

It was his turn for a letter this night—a big, fat letter, which, being opened, emitted money—a fat check, with a promise of more. Now, that was a beginning.

Up the stairs in bounds, a noisy certainty that Mr. Janvers would be sputtering protests to Mrs. Larkins upon the morrow—but what of that to-night? To-night a light under her door—to-night courage for a single knock.

Then answers—not whispers through a tiny crack in the door like many a time before—but the door flung wide open. Not the lonely lodger, but Rhoda with a posy in her hair and color in cheeks—Rhoda on the mountain peaks of happiness. She began talking before Paul Craver could speak:—

"Now, if you're rich?"

"I am rich," he interrupted, waving a publisher's pink check.

"Then, Paul, you fall heir to this big castle of mine."

He did not understand, but she gave him no time to ask.

"I am going out of the castle, dear Paul," said she.

But still he did not understand.

"Not into the night?" he persisted.

"No, thank God. I am going out into the sunshine—the great sunshine of my life."

And that night Paul Craver knew that the sunshine was going out of his life. He cried himself to sleep, like a disappointed girl.

(To be continued.)